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June 30, 2015

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INTERVIEW WITH MANFRED HILDERMEIER

June 30, 2015[1]

Stefan Plaggenborg (SP): *You wrote two books on the "The Russian Revolution," which cover the years 1905 to 1921; the "History of the Soviet Union" beginning in 1917; and, recently, you published a "History of Russia" from the Middle Ages to 1917. It seems that 1917 lies somewhat in the middle of your research interests. However, we do not find a chapter about the question of whether or how one should remember this particular year in Russian history. We could start with this question. The beginning of World War I was widely and publically remembered all over Europe. Why should societies in Europe and elsewhere remember Russia's year 1917, and what should they remember?*

Manfred Hildermeier (MH): The answer is simple, because the Russian events of 1917 had a Europe-wide and, in the long run, even—in the very sense of the word—a global impact. This is true in several respects. For one, the demise of the Tsarist Empire had also the almost immediate consequence of Russia's military breakdown. As is well known, the so-called Kerensky-Offensive of July was in vain and ended in disaster. Thereafter, the German troops could move eastward more or less without any Russian resistance. Germany could score a victory while it remained stuck in a stalemate at the Western front. Nobody knows what would have happened if Russia could have mustered more resistance in the East, if it had not left the war concluding the peace of Brest-Litovsk, and could have participated in the Versailles talks as one of the winners. It is doubtful whether there would have been a Rapallo.

SP: *Well, Brest-Litovsk did not help the Germans in the longer run. But what about the revolution?*

MH: Still more important were the European and world-wide consequences of the October coup d'état. This becomes immediately clear—without any kind of "contrafactual" speculation. First of all, there was the definite split between the majority of Western European Socialist parties and the Bolsheviks, mainly because

1. This interview was conducted on June 30, 2015 by Sefan Plaggenborg, professor of East-European history at Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany.

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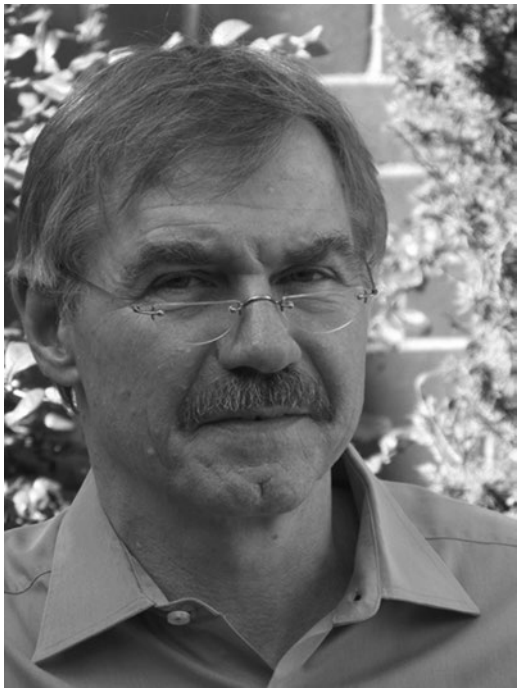

Manfred Hildermeier, Professor of East-European history,
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of two matters of dispute: whether the coup was legitimate according to Marxist ideology and, of course, which kind of post-revolutionary regime should be established. As is well known, the moderate socialists in Western Europe categorically declined any kind of repressive measures; a minority justified them as a necessity as long as the class enemy would not be defeated.

This, then, is a second major repercussion of the Bolshevik coup: that all over Europe the socialist camp definitely—and, not by chance, mostly along the divide of August 1914, which marked the beginning of this process—disintegrated into "communists" and "social democrats" (or socialists). Not only in Germany the "in-fight" of these two camps to a high degree shaped the internal development during the interwar period, weakening its potential to resist fascist movements that were ascending all over Europe.

SP: *That's interesting. It sounds a little as if you were blaming the Bolsheviks for the rise of fascism instead of mentioning the political, constitutional, national, or ethnic and economic crises of the liberal parliamentary systems after 1918. Let me be more precise: I mean, were they responsible in an unintended way, because in 1917 they could not know that Fascism would emerge?*

MH: Of course in 1917 they could not know what would happen in Europe after 1918. They were not responsible. That's not what I mean. But when we are talking about political fights between right and left in interwar Europe, and in Germany in particular, it seems clear to me that the division of the socialists indeed weakened their ability to resist fascism. In this context I would like to stress a third major consequence of the "Red October": the antagonism of the political and ideological systems. It was clear from the very first days of the new regime that it understood itself—and was understood in this way outside of Russia—as a contrast and challenge to liberal democracy and its capitalist socioeconomic order. The most "articulate" systems of this kind were the American and the English, which in consequence became its main rivals and adversaries. This soon became evident in the relation to Great Britain resulting, e.g., even in the interruption of diplomatic relations in 1927; in relation to the USA it was less visible only because of their "isolationist" policy during the twenties. As is well known, it was in the last resort only the rise of fascism that led to a (very) slow rapprochement before the Second World War and an alliance during the war. This cooperation, therefore, should not be misunderstood as normalcy. To the contrary: antagonism was the rule, and the ideological rivalry of the prewar decades only foreshadowed political competition on a world- wide scale during the Cold War. This state of affairs in the last resort only ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

SP: *Do you think the Soviet answer to the questions of modernity collapsed?*

MH: In a general way, yes. But before talking of the collapse we should remember that the Soviet Union was a sort of a development-pattern for other countries. Last but not least, the unintended long-term effect of the October coup also should be mentioned. It was a consequence of an unintended fact itself—that what

the Bolsheviks called their "socialist revolution" took place in a country that was only partially industrialized. It has become unfashionable to call it "backward" because backward is only the reverse side of modern and thus just as "normative" as the concept of modernization. Still, I keep using this term because I don't see any adequate substitute. In any case, a socialist movement in theory should not have been victorious in a country that economically clearly lagged behind, e.g., Germany or Britain. The socialist takeover thus was—as the event has aptly been dubbed—a kind of an "error of Columbus." But even because of this character it became a model for what later was called the "Third World." "Underdeveloped" countries saw it as an example in their fight against the "capitalist" center of the world. The struggle for socio-economic emancipation thereby fused with aspirations for national autonomy. Since the Bolsheviks in the last resort stayed alone in their effort to build socialism, they could serve as a model for this symbiosis too. I would consider this as one of the major causes for the attractiveness of Soviet Marxism in Africa, Asia, and Latin America after the Second World War.

SP: *Thus the bipolar conflict you are talking about rolled over to states and societies in the "Third World" where people suffered severe effects from the direct military interventions of the two super-powers. Now we have come to the global level of effects of 1917. Let's go back to Russia. Do you think there is still a historical legacy of Russia's 1917 in today's Russia? What would these effects be?*

MH: This is difficult to say. On the surface and, so to say, directly, probably very few, since even the last "Soviet generation" by now will have retired from their professions and public life. And even remnants of Soviet institutions like policlinics seem to have vanished, at least in the cities.

SP: *What about the institutions of repression, for instance the KGB (with its different names up to today)?*

MH: The KGB is part of a bigger story. It is probably the only institution that survived more or less entirely from the Soviet Union—and even more from Lenin's and Stalin's times. The continuity of the secret police is stunning indeed. And though there probably have been more than superficial changes after 1953 and again during the perestroika, nobody really knows to what degree an "esprit de corps" and a self-conception including the ways of action survived. In principle the archive of the FSB—including the records of all its predecessors VČK, OGPU, NKVD, KGB—has been opened, but in reality only to a minimal degree. Thick volumes on the NKVD have been published, but, as far as I see, none on the last half century. So the KGB's precise role remains unknown. Only two things seem evident: that the KGB was one of the three "columns" that bore the Soviet system, and that at the same time it remained subordinate to the party and its General Secretary; otherwise you could not explain why it hesitated so long before trying to stop Gorbachev's reforms by ousting him.

Aside from this institutional succession, the KGB may be considered as a kind of a symbol for a kind of "negative" legacy which the October coup bequeathed to

the Soviet Regime and—as it seems now—the Soviet Union to present-day Russia. It is the legacy of thwarting all prerevolutionary developments towards a pluralistic, civic society and a corresponding political system. Recent literature has shown that such changes had begun with the 1905 revolution. The chances for liberal constitutionalism, meanwhile, are seen more positively by far than some decades ago. In particular I think of the studies of Häfner, Hausmann, Tumanova, and Dowler, and I myself discussed this problem, too.[2] Especially in the provinces a "liberal milieu" emerged, which became indispensible for the Tsarist state during the war and flourished after its demise in the February revolution. This milieu, its social underpinnings and political forces, could have led Russia on a different path for its future development. This is, of course, the liberal interpretation of the 1917 events, and there are, as is well known, many counter-arguments that deserve serious consideration. However one assesses the pros and cons, the outcome is clear: the liberal forces were driven out of the country and/or suppressed. There was no place for them, and there would be none before Gorbachev's glasnost.

SP: *The bonmot seems to be correct that says, optimists have a better life, but pessimists are better informed optimists. As historians we are always better informed than the contemporaries. Some people say liberalism never had a chance in Russia.*

MH: After 1991 a decade began during which Russia for sure undertook the most energetic effort of its history since 1905 to establish a pluralistic and democratic regime, comparable only with the first half of the year 1917. But unfortunately it was accompanied by the waning of state authority, widespread crime, a deep economic crisis, and—not least—by rampant corruption. In a sense the experience of 1917 re-emerged: pluralism, regionalism, and democracy entailed crisis, crime, and chaos. For sure, the 1990s did not help to promote Western-type liberal society. I will leave it open as to what degree the bad experience of the Eltsin-years really explains the reemergence of a strong state under Putin. In any case, it helps to do so, if only because of the obvious fact that this reemergence began, so to speak, "innocuously" just by restoring order, forcing the new "oligarchs" to pay taxes, and alleviating widespread poverty. As it seems, Putin's third period in office, beginning in 2012, definitely marks the transformation from recentralizing power and the restoration of state authority into an authoritarian, illiberal regime. Conservatives argue that this not only is a reaction to chaos, but a predictable return to Russia's roots—to a past without an "active" civil society, pluralism, or strong parties, dominated instead by a powerful state. Whether one accepts this kind of

2. L. Häfner, *Gesellschaft als lokale Veranstaltung: Die Wolgastädte Kazan´ und Saratov (1870-1914)* (Cologne, 2004); A.S. Tumanova, ed., *Samoorganizatsiia rossiiskoj obshestvennosti v poslednei treti XVIII-načale XX v.* (M., 2011); W. Dowler, *Russia in 1913* (DeKalb, IL, 2010); G. Hausmann, *Gesellschaft als lokale Veranstaltung: Selbstverwaltung, Assoziierung und Geselligkeit in den Städten des ausgehenden Zarenreiches* (Göttingen, 2002); M. Hildermeier, *Geschichte Russlands: Vom Mittelalter bis zur Oktoberrevolution* (München, 2013), 1076.

historical continuity or not, the Bolshevik regime, established in 1917, and all the more, of course, its perversion into Stalinism, did not foster any kind of mentality, let alone institutional forms (as, e.g., associations in the prerevolutionary years), that could serve as catalysts for the development of a solid, "sustainable" liberal political order.

SP: *You are certainly aware that some people will consider your words as a very mild description of "Putin's" Russia today. Let's change the perspective and have a look at our work as historians. Maybe 1917 has become history in the sense that it has ceased to be a point of historical orientation; is it historiographically "finished" as well?*

MH: Indeed I have the impression that few dramatically new insights will come up concerning the year 1917 itself. Research has concentrated on these events from the very beginning; in contrast to later years, sources were abundant, and there was hardly any secrecy. And, last but not least, social historians of the 1970s and 1980s (not to mention Soviet history) devoted much of their sweat to thorough studies on this crucial year of Russian history. Recently there is a change of perspective centering on the "construction" of October in memory; this, so to say, is overdue if you consider the vast literature on "memory of…" history, e.g., of the holocaust in German. But—leaving aside the complex problem of the relationship between "history" and "memory"—our knowledge about the developments of 1917 is not deeply touched by these new kinds of approach.

My answer is different taking into account the revolution in a broader context, starting at least in 1914 and ending in 1920-1921, i.e., including the civil war. With regard to this "seven years' crisis and war" as a whole and with regard to the revolution as a process, new insights have been advanced during the last years, and I don't see any reason to assume that this kind of rethinking and reconceptualization will stop. There is a sharpened consciousness for continuities in repressing or at least moulding society by the state from World War I to the early Soviet period. This is embedded in an overall interpretation that in a sense reverses the traditional backwardness approach by asking the opposite question: to what degree the Soviet Union was modern.

SP: *From what you said earlier I got the impression that the Soviet Union did not find an answer to the big questions of modernization.*

MH: One should consider more aspects of "positive" or "negative" continuities, e.g., with regard to the character of both the old regime and the new, as empires. At the same time, such questions open the Russian developments to comparisons, with other empires or other states and societies following, at least temporarily, the path of modernizing. So, I would see chances for new interpretations and corresponding research primarily along these lines of thought – reconsidering the old question of continuity and break and comparing the Russian development in the framework of "high modernist" politics as a means of overcoming backwardness by an "ideological leap."

S.P: *You probably will not disagree when I call you the historian who has worked—and is still working—on Russian history and its revolutionary period in the most systematic social historian-manner I know. Just now you were a little critical of history of memory—or at least of the number of studies within this field. Let us therefore revive Soviet rituals for a moment: How do you regard (criticize, in Soviet-speak) your own oeuvre in light of ongoing research and of your own, maybe changing, views?*

MH: I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on the Socialist Revolutionary Party before the First World War in the first half of the 1970s with Dietrich Geyer at Tübingen. This was the high time of social history in Germany, dominated by the "Bielefeld-school." H.-U. Wehler and J. Kocka taught us that historical analyses need concepts and models; they compared history to sociology; we read Max Weber or, in our field, A. Gerschenkron and discussed the advantages of a structural interpretation of long-term processes in comparison to an "histoire événementielle." My thesis, I would say, of course, was deeply affected by these notions, conceptions, and models. In my master thesis I had already tried to show that the defeat of the SRs in 1917 came not by chance, but that their party suffered from some structural weaknesses resulting from some basic ideological tenets and their heritage of political action (e.g., the "individual terror," as they called it). So in my larger work I tried to find and describe such problems in all main aspects of the party, its theoretical-ideological development as well as in their organization and tactics. Reviewers from the older generation (like M. Raeff) reproached me for presenting a deterministic interpretation; others from the "middle" generation of that time considered my approach fruitful, leading to new insights. Both sides had friendly words to say concerning my source base because, for the first time, I could use documents from the archive of the party's Central Committee in exile, which was (and is) kept at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. Because of this, I tend to think that the bulk of my work still retains its value. Concerning the interpretation, of course, I now would stress the importance of factors that I underestimated as a consequence of the focus on structures.

SP: *Could you say which factors you have in mind?*

MH: For sure the disruption in almost all sectors of state administration, society, and economy caused by the World War was more important for the events of 1917 than I assumed. This by itself would reduce the "deterministic" quality of my main argument. On the other hand, I would stick to my argument that the terror as a form of political action was disruptive for the party and that in the last resort it did not find a convincing solution for its main problem—to come to terms with industrial development in the cities and central areas of the country. As ever, new approaches tend to overstress their novelty, the next "turn" does the same but in the contrary direction, so that a "wise" judgment in hindsight would try to fix the pendulum somewhere in the middle.

SP: *Oh, I fear not everybody will follow this again mild description. Sympathizers of Historical Anthropology, Cultural Anthropology, or everyday-history would not agree and point out the fact that the Wehler school is only one way to*

study history, which unfortunately left out men and women, of whom somebody who was quite famous in earlier times said that they make their history themselves, to say it rather roughly for the purpose given here. No reason for self-criticism?

MH: It may be that some critics of the "Bielefeldians" formulated the contrast like this. I always had the impression that the debate between "culturalists" and "social historians" tended to depict both in extreme terms and to a high degree constructed differences that in this sharpness hardly existed or existed only in theory and rarely in the concrete research. One should not forget that probably the main intellectual authority for this "school," Max Weber, was a follower of neo-Kantian epistemology. Most of the social historians did not forget his famous dictum that ideas ("Weltbilder"), not (material) interests, shape reality, and historical perceptions always reflect the dominant cultural norms and values of the time. So, I think, the major role of ideas, perceptions, tradition, and the whole "cosmos" of mentality was not forgotten—at least in practice and by many of those who are considered (and maybe consider themselves) as social historians. Moreover, it was my impression too that the "other side" also formulated its position pointedly. So I would stick to my metaphor of the pendulum, which should be halted in middle.

Concerning my survey over the process of revolution from 1905 to 1921,[3] I would comment on it similarly. Especially the summary contains a kind of a structural interpretation that I would not repeat without changes. In the main chapters, of course, I would take into account new insights on the agrarian crisis (put forward by Paul Gregory[4] and others) disproving the "classical" liberal interpretation. I would stress the importance of the inner repercussions of the First World War, and, to correct what I now consider the most important shortcoming, I would highlight the role of the so-called "voluntary associations" after 1906, which indeed laid the foundation for civil society in the provinces (see above). As a consequence, my overall judgment would be more "optimistic"—in terms of the old quarrel about the "chances of liberal constitutionalism"—culminating in the thesis, that there *were* alternatives to Bolshevik rule. I tried to formulate this modified view on the political and social developments in prewar Russia in my latest book.[5] And, needless to say, in the same way I will correct the first chapters of my "History of the Soviet Union," a second edition of which is in preparation for the centenary of the "Red October."

SP: *So we are coming back to our beginning. We started with the omitted chapter on the history of memories in your books on 1917, and unintendedly we end with your contribution to the 1917-centenary. I think that's a perfect final phrase for the jubilee-issue of the Cahiers. Thanks a lot for taking the time for the interview!*

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3. *Die Russische Revolution 1905-1921*, 6th ed. (Frankfurt, 2009 (Orig. 1989)).

4. P.R. Gregory, *Before Command: An Economic History of Russia from Emancipation to the First Five-Year Plan* (Princeton, 1994).

5. Hildermeier, *Geschichte Russlands*, esp. 962, 1050, 1129, 1297, 1282.

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